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SUBJECT: ST. PETERSBURG AUTHORITIES CONTINUE HARASSMENT OF OPPONENTS

¶1. (SBU) Summary. The St. Petersburg police recently conducted a raid, with questionable justification, on the offices of a local offshoot of the Communist Party which had been vocally criticizing the city government. Separately, the city authorities denied permission to civil rights activists to hold a rally commemorating the failure of the 1991 Soviet-hardliner coup, citing dubious maintenance and reconstruction requirements at the proposed rally site. These incidents are just the latest in a series of actions reflecting a broader trend of government harassment of perceived opponents. End Summary.

Police Raid Offices of Communist Offshoot Organization

¶2. (SBU) The Movement of Communists of St. Petersburg and Leningrad Oblast (KPLO) is a far left-wing St. Petersburg-based political organization distinct from the Communist Party (KPRF).

Unlike the KPRF, the KPLO does not cooperate with the federal and regional governments, and occasionally participates in opposition rallies. Recently, KPLO members launched a campaign to protect the Lenin monument located in front of the Finland Railway Station which had been vandalized earlier this year. The KPLO fears the city government is more likely to dismantle the monument than restore it.

¶3. (SBU) On August 18, according to local press accounts, the St. Petersburg police raided the offices of local attorney Yuriy Savin, where the KPLO rents office space. Media reported that the raid ended during the early hours of August 19, and that the action had been initiated by the St. Petersburg branch of the Investigative Committee of the General Prosecutor's Office.

¶4. (SBU) Two KPLO computers were seized, along with the party's official seal and numerous documents. These documents included membership data and various papers prepared by KPLO candidates for the upcoming municipal elections in Leningrad Oblast that will be held in October. Press reports the search was officially explained as supporting a criminal investigation into a real estate deal arranged by Savin's firm. However, KPLO Leader Sergey Malinkovich is highly skeptical of the official explanation. Malinkovich has asserted through the media that the police had no legal right to search KPLO's section of the office building, and claims that the raid was politically motivated.

City Prevents Rally to Commemorate 1991 Coup Defeat

¶5. (SBU) August 21 marked the 18th anniversary of the failed 1991 putsch. Popular resistance to the putsch in St. Petersburg centered around St. Isaac's square, located in the very heart of the city. Various political and civil activists hoped to celebrate the victory of pro-democracy forces and on August 10 they applied for permission to hold their commemorative rally at the same St. Isaac's square. However, the city administration denied permission for the rally based on the purported need to conduct maintenance work on the site. As an alternative, the city government offered a venue in a park far away from the city center - a location not associated with the 1991 events.

¶6. (SBU) The organizers, one of whom is a consulate contact and recently met with Poloff, subsequently filed a lawsuit challenging the government's refusal. On August 19, the local district court ruled to uphold the government's decision. With that ruling, the organizers then decided to hold a commemoration event within the limits of what they were permitted to do by the government by altering the format of their event such that it became a "meeting of witnesses of the 1991 events," rather than an official commemorative ceremony.

7 (SBU) About 50 people attended the truncated gathering, which was almost indistinguishable from everyday activity on the square since no one brought any banners, posters or loudspeakers - all of which were prohibited in accordance with the revised format of the gathering. The police were present during the small rally, and ordered the group to disperse on several occasions. No participant was arrested or detained. The media reported that the maintenance work cited by the government as the reason the rally could not be held at the site consisted of several construction workers idly standing around the site.

¶8. (SBU) Comment. The police raid on the communist offices is reminiscent of their raid on the St. Petersburg Memorial headquarters in December, 2008 - both raids were explained by the government based on prosaic reasons. However, the main drive of the raid appears likely instead to have been an attempt to harass and scrutinize an organization whose politics increasingly challenge the government. Likewise, the denial of a demonstration permit to the activists demonstrates the government's general intolerance of dissent and the public expression of views it considers to be potentially disruptive. End comment.

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